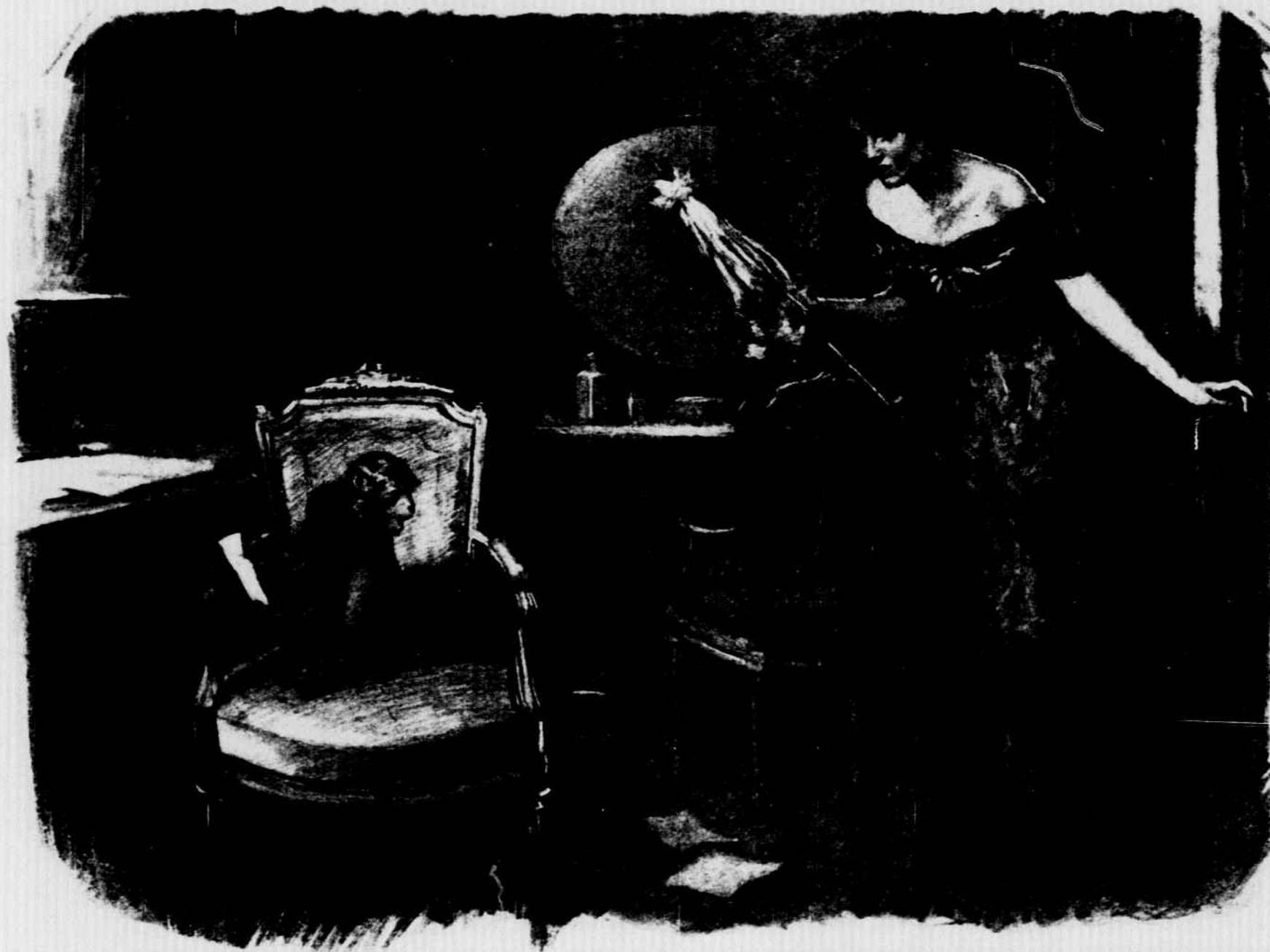


THE GODS OF SIMLA

Entry No. 43 in Our Prize Story Competition

BY MICHAEL WHITE



The Monkey Evidently Saw That His Sanctity Was Not Appreciated by White Folk.

As usual, the Viceroy of India went up to Simla to escape the hot weather. For the same reason all the greater official lights followed, with a foreign consul or two representing the diplomatic corps at the viceregal court; hence, one part why Colonel Cruden, Consul General, U. S. A., and family were registered early in the season at Peliti's hotel. The other part was Miss Cruden's insistence that Simla was never so much better than the Western Ghats or Darjiling as a summer resort. Not that she had been there previously; but on the way out from Europe it had all been explained to her by a certain young A. D. C. to the Viceroy, Lieutenant Lord Marston, 17th Dragoons. He had been very earnest about the matter, painting the Simla atmosphere in idealistic colors. Anyone can imagine the impression made when two deck chairs are drawn close together, while a P. & O. glides easily over a tropical sea. Therefore she had prevailed and carried her parents up to Simla.

Up to Simla also soon came the other people who want things apart from climate,—deputies and assistants on the Civil Side, Colonels and Majors of the military, their wives, daughters, and establishments, all hoping by some lucky chance to gain five minutes' private talk with the Viceroy. Lastly the official barrier against native Princes was cautiously let down, and a few privileged rulers permitted the ascent to bask in the light of the Viceroy's favor. This mandate is strictly enforced; otherwise Simla would become a vast camp of political intrigue.

Among the first of those to arrive was the young Maharaja of Bikandra. His journey had been rather enforced to explain certain proceedings not quite pleasing to the supreme Government. A little less horse racing in favor of a trifle more rulership, perhaps more of the best native traits in place of undesirable European habits,—such was the advice purposed to impress upon him. His father had been a favorite of former Viceroys; that was why the present holder of office summoned the young Maharaja for a heart to heart talk. He was personally attractive in his London made clothes, except the turban; but as yet was clearly in need of a bearing rein. He went to Peliti's with his suite,—that famous hostelry where holy monkeys scramble over the roof, peer in at the windows, drop down through skylights, steal hairpins, and if you are not forewarned may give you the scare of a life by awakening to find one chattering away on the foot of your bed. As before remarked, the Crudens were among Bikandra's fellow guests at Peliti's.

Everyone knows how official Simla combines social entertainment with the business of governing over three hundred millions of people. A stranger might imagine the whole scheme of it lay in dances, dinners, amateur theatricals, polo, picnics, and rides on the mall; but the telegraph wire that runs down from that airy of the Himalayan foothills could tell a different story. Occa-

sionally the Viceroy looks quite serious; but not for worlds would he admit there was anything more on his mind than his deep regret that certain stunning Paris frocks must remain in their trunks, because a Highness of some kind had died thousands of miles away and the court had gone into mourning.

INTO that side of Simla life the Crudens, of course, found the doors wide open. For the first two weeks Mrs. and Miss Cruden were busy scrambling up and down the hillsides in their rickshaws returning calls, while the Colonel went his official round scattering visiting "pasteboards." In the meantime Marston discovered that his duties frequently took him the same way as Miss Cruden's rickshaw, trotting close to her flying wheels, and impressing upon her jampanees horrible threats if they did not take particular care of the American "burra memsahib," which means a lady of the great official world as apart from the *chota* or little people. Simla, of course, took notice and discussed the matter over afternoon teacups.

So things went along pleasantly until Miss Cruden entered her room one afternoon to put on her habit for a ride with Marston. On a lounge she noticed a small silk embroidered box, such as is used sometimes by native jewelers to hold a valuable trinket, and possibly fashioned with great skill out of a discarded wafer can. Curiosity prompted Miss Cruden to open the box and remove the usual layer of wadding. She discovered a glittering hair ornament, also a half sheet of tinted, perfumed notepaper. Thereon was inscribed a translation of some Persian verse breathing the ardor of that subtle language in which the single word "rose" bears at least twelve shades of meaning. Manifestly, one should be very careful in writing Persian verse to a lady. Miss Cruden at once set aside Marston as the source of the gift. He knew a lot about tiger shooting; but was hardly of the temperament to risk the danger of Persian verse by way of expressing his sentiments. Besides, no one would accuse Marston of writing on pink notepaper strongly suggestive of musk. She was puzzling over the question of the donor when her native maid jangled into the room.

"Hanki," she questioned, "who sent that package I found on the lounge?"

Hanki glanced at her mistress's face, then at the open box. "Memsahib, I do not know," she answered.

"You do not know!" repeated Miss Cruden rather severely; for the suspicion entered her mind that Hanki had been bribed to concealment. "But you must know something about it!"

"Not I!" protested Hanki. "Would the Memsahib accuse me of telling a lie, who live upon the bounty of her honored parent? Am I not a respectable married woman, with a husband who is groom to this family by the Memsahib's favor? Have I not an uncle?"

"Yes, yes!" Miss Cruden cut short an endless kin-

folk panegyric. "But if you didn't put it there, who did?"

Hanki threw up her hands with a clash of brass bangles. "If I do not know, how can I tell?" she cried. "Are there not servants of other people, utterly below the Memsahib's rank, in this place, also sweepers and water carriers of low caste, with whom the Memsahib knows I do not associate? But if the Memsahib wishes, I shall ask the head khitmutgar."

"No," reflected Miss Cruden on a second thought, which prompted the desire not to make the matter of undue importance all over Simla. "I will find out in another way. Besides, I am in a hurry for my habit."

WHEN her riding attire was complete, she locked the trinket in her desk and thrust the pink note into her glove. Then she went out, to find Marston waiting to assist her into the saddle. They rode off at a smart canter. After they had escaped from the observant eyes of Simla and broken into a slower pace, she introduced the subject of her mysterious present. She produced the note from her glove and handed it to Marston. He regarded it with keen disapproval.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "Who on earth could have sent you a thing like that? It must have been some native chap. Let's think of a possible culprit—Bikandra?"

"But," she protested, "why should he send me 'a rose plucked from his heart' in verse, backed up by a diamond hair ornament? We have met the Maharaja out a few times, and he and Dad have exchanged calls; but I have hardly spoken a dozen words to him. It would be absurd to suppose he had sent me the present."

"Impossible to say," remarked Marston, tugging thoughtfully at his blond mustache. "You never can tell what

these native fellows will do next. Perhaps, if I challenge him to polo, and hit him over the head by accident, we shall learn the secret."

"You will not do anything of the kind!" she enjoined. "I am sure Bikandra did not send it."

"Then who did?"

"Exactly what I asked Hanki without gaining a satisfactory answer. So far as I can see, we must await developments."

Here the subject was interrupted by the Viceroy's carriage swinging round a curve. When salutes had been exchanged, the incident directed conversation upon the Viceroy's levee and dance the following night. Marston poured into a sympathetic ear the troubles of an A. D. C. over matters of dress and precedence.

"Now there's Bolton-Thorpe," he illustrated a particular case. "Thorpe is a political—by the way, Resident at Bikandra's capital. The Thorpes are staying with the St. Clairs. St. Clair is merely on the staff of the Surgeon General; but Mrs. St. Clair's father is a Knight and an M. P. Now, then, who is to bob first to the Viceroy, Mrs. Thorpe or Mrs. St. Clair, guest or hostess?"

"Give it up," laughed Miss Cruden.

"Yes; but I can't," he complained wearily. "As you are on the diplomatic list, I should have thought you would have been able to help me better."

Chatting in this way they paced together, until they returned to Simla as bungalow lights began to dot the purple hillsides and a fleecy mist crept into the deeper valleys. A hasty *au revoir* was all that could be exchanged before Marston galloped off to his evening duties.

"Don't mention the present to anyone," she bade him. "I should prefer not to fix the guilt without being certain. Perhaps the owner will call or send, having discovered a mistake."

"I know how to obey a command," laughed Marston, waving a hand to her while his horse reared on two legs and shot into the twilight.

THE bestower of the gift was apparently not aware that he had committed a serious breach of taste, neither did he seem in a hurry to disclose his identity. He did not call to explain during the next twenty-four hours, and Miss Cruden began to wonder how to settle the matter. The value of the trinket was an additional reason why she did not consider herself by any means its rightful owner.

But for the time being the Viceroy's dance was uppermost. The Crudens had dined early, and their rickshaws were at the door, when Miss Cruden ran back into her room for a light wrap.

And there, seated at her writing table, was a gray whiskered old monkey, presenting an absurd figure in imitation of a human being reading a letter, only upside down. He had evidently purloined a packet of letters